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TAGS: PREF PGOV SMIG PREL MO AG
SUBJECT: UNHCR VISIT YIELDS HOPE FOR PROGRESS IN MOROCCO

REF: CASABLANCA 168

Classified By: Political Counselor Gregory Thome, Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: UNHCR Antonio Guterres briefed US and Swedish diplomats on his Sept. 8-12 trip to Algeria, Morocco and Western Sahara. He described as generally positive the Moroccan, Algerian and Polisario responses to his calls for larger and more frequent family visitations; for a direct land link from Tindouf to Western Sahara; and for an effective, non-politicized registration process in the refugee camps. However, he cautioned that, while supportive, all sides attached potentially troublesome "caveats" to their willingness to move forward. Separately, Guterres also pressed the GOM to implement a legal mechanism for registering refugees and adjudicating asylum claims in Morocco, emphasizing that Morocco will not be able to fully control illegal immigration unless such structures are in place. Overall, Guterres expressed optimism regarding the progress being made on UNHCR's short-term objectives in Morocco, but he was pessimistic about a long-term solution to the Western Sahara situation and the refugee predicament it has produced. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) On September 11, UN High Commissioner for Refugees and former Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Guterres visited Rabat as part of a wider regional tour. In addition to meeting with the Moroccan Prime Minister and Ministers of Interior, Justice and Foreign Affairs, Guterres also briefed US and Swedish diplomats (the latter as representatives of the current EU Presidency) on his Sept. 8-10 visit to Algiers, Tindouf and Rabat as well as his plans for a Sept. 12 visit to Western Sahara.

Tindouf: Family Visitations Could Increase

¶3. (C) Regarding Tindouf and the refugee camps, Guterres said he pressed Algerian, Moroccan and Polisario leaders to strengthen and expand the ongoing confidence building measures (CBMs). All sides agreed that the UNHCR-sponsored family visitation program continued to represent the most important CBM, from both humanitarian and political perspectives, and they committed to allow UNHCR to increase the number and frequency of those visits. The demand for visitation is enormous; to date, UNHCR has facilitated 8000 visits, but more than 40,000 persons have registered.

¶4. (C) Guterres also described as "positive" the agreement he heard from the GOA, the GOM and the Polisario regarding creation of a direct land link from Tindouf to Western Sahara via Mahbes, rather than via the long, circuitous and -- for all intents and purposes -- unworkable route through the "liberated areas." The zone is heavily mined and the creation of the land route

will not be easy, but Guterres welcomed the political will expressed by all sides as a significant first step.

Registration Still A Problem in Tindouf

¶5. (C) Guterres described as "much less positive" his conversations regarding registration in the Tindouf camps. The GOM and the GOA remain very far from agreement on permitting UNHCR to conduct census, and Guterres suggested that he made little headway in bringing them closer together. A Spanish-funded program to provide ID cards to refugees is ongoing, but has become politically problematic because the Polisario continues to insist that the cards be issued in the name of the "Government of Western Sahara." Camp conditions themselves have improved and, Guterres emphasized, they in no way resemble "concentration camps," as some Algerian and Polisario officials occasionally allege. Still, a lack of clear numbers -- which all sides manipulate -- makes providing assistance and protection a challenge. (COMMENT: Guterres estimated that there about 100,000 refugees -- a figure conveniently midway between the typical GOM estimate of 50,000 and the Polisario estimate of 150,000. END COMMENT.)

Morocco Needs An Asylum Policy

¶6. (C) Aside from Tindouf, the Guterres' other objective in Morocco was to press the GOM to create a government office that will register refugees and adjudicate asylum claims and to pass the necessary asylum legislation. The GOM has assured UNHCR since 2007 that it will soon implement asylum procedures. However, concrete action has not been forthcoming (reftel). The GOM fears that if it adopts such procedures, it would create a "pull factor" that would encourage economic migrants to claim asylum, while also providing Europe with an opportunity to "dump" illegal immigrants that it expels into Morocco. The GOM does permit UNHCR to adjudicate asylum claims and to grant identification cards to refugees. As a result, UNHCR notes that refugees and asylum seekers do not face significant physical protection issues; however, legal protection will remain problematic until the GOM also provides them identity cards and some sort of legal status under Moroccan law.

¶7. (C) In lobbying the GOM to take that next step, Guterres noted that he hoped to create a greater sense of urgency within the GOM by focusing his demarche more on "homeland security" issues than on Morocco's commitments under the Geneva conventions. Until such time as the GOM creates such adjudication mechanisms, he told his interlocutors, it will never be fully in control of its complicated illegal immigration problem. As a sweetener, he also explained to officials that resettlement for registered refugees that are in Morocco (UNHCR reports about 500) could become available, but again only after Moroccan procedures are in place. Overall, Guterres reported that he received cautiously positive responses to his arguments, and asked that the US and the EU also help move the GOM in the right direction.

Comment

¶8. (C) Guterres was optimistic and upbeat about UNHCR's short- and medium-term goals in Morocco, suggesting that his visit clearly either advanced -- or at least improved the tone of discussions regarding -- Tindouf visitations and the asylum issue in Morocco. However, he cautioned that all sides were quick to add "caveats" that could quickly derail cooperation, especially on CBMs and other issues in Tindouf. And more broadly, he was decidedly less optimistic about a long term solution to the Western Sahara question, noting that the GOM and the GOA are still unable even to define many key challenges in the same terms. END COMMENT.

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Millard